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Bespoke: Increasing social inclusion through community journalism and bespoke design

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Introduction

'Bespoke' is a multidisciplinary project investigating how digital technologies can increase social inclusion and improve lives. (www.bespokeproject.org)

The research team that formulated 'Bespoke' met in December 2008 after successful selection to participate in a Digital Economy 'Sandpit' event.

Bespoke is a 'work in progress' bringing together researchers from design, journalism and computer science to explore the possibilities of 'digital'. Moving beyond social cohesion projects aimed at giving communities a voice 'Bespoke' is attempting to connect these voices to tangible benefits in the form of real world outcomes with genuine impacts. These could be design objects reconnecting people with the digital world. They could be changes to the physical environment brought about using digital technologies.

Context

In 1995 Nicholas Negroponte's "Being Digital" [1] points to a future where computers have moved beyond computing to being facilitators of all aspects of our social lives. Moving forward to 1998, Microsoft Research published "Being Human" [2] as a viewpoint on HCI in 2020. These two perspectives of Being Digital and Being Human position where Digital and Social can start to come together to provide a platform for an internet of people rather than an internet of things - And perhaps in stark contrast to Negroponte - Atoms are very much 'in'.

Digital Britain?

Many people in the UK are currently excluded from the benefits of digital technologies.

Digital Futures '10, October 11-12, Nottingham, UK

The Digital Britain report [3] cites Ofcom's original research to frame the questions why "large parts of the UK society are unable, unwilling or unprepared to connect to digital technology?" whilst failing to offer a comprehensive solution. Thackera's response is to build a wireless infrastructure.

"If the development objective is to enable people to meet and interact, why build a science centre? Deploy free wi-fi across your city for a fraction of the cost - and let Starbucks provide the meeting space", John Thackera, 2009 [4]

Like many deprived areas of the UK there is no Starbucks on the Callon and Fishwick estate. There is no shopping centre, no library, no sports centre, no 'centre' of any sort.

Location

The Bespoke project is based in Preston, Lancashire on an estate comprising two areas known as 'Callon' and 'Fishwick'. Callon was built in the 1930s and mainly comprises semi-detached housing. Residents are 'white British'. The housing stock is mainly controlled by housing associations, but there are some privately owned homes. The area has previously suffered distinct anti-social behaviour problems (for example being featured in the 'Neighbours from Hell' TV programme and was also mistakenly labelled as the 'race hate capital of Britain' after a murder in 2006. A subsequent enquiry later found this was not a racially-aggravated assault) and has been some regeneration. According to Home office statistics people living there would be considered as among the 10 per cent *most* deprived in the UK. This situation was at its worse between 2004 and 2007, which is when the data used to conclude the level of deprivations was recorded.

Journalism and bespoke design

The Bespoke project has two parts. The first part involves establishing a team of community journalists to report on the issues that are important to them and to their neighbourhood through a newspaper and hyper-local news

website. The second part of the project is centred on innovative design. Partner universities (Dundee, Falmouth, Newcastle, Surrey, and UCLan) use the news stories created by journalists to inspire radically simple 'Bespoke' design solutions focused on what the community really needs.

We are testing this new methodology and hope to demonstrate that when applied consistently, and allowing time for the quality of debate to develop through the community journalism, the level of scrutiny of the designs by the community will help improve the design process and socially shape design. This thinking is based on the premise that greater participation will lead to greater transparency of the process and enable designers to hear voices they would not normally hear.

Hyper Local News

Researchers adopted a twin track approach to engaging the community initially. First steps were to build relationships with residents through existing channels of stakeholders and community groups. Researcher Sean Smith (a former Journalist) also spent time 'cold calling' to introduce the project. Katie Smith was ethnographer to the project and spent time living on the estate in the early stages. Whilst the research team felt they had a clear set of intentions articulating them and persuading residents to participate was problematic. The largest single problem was conceptual. Although the notion of having 'your voice heard' is a potentially positive and liberating one, local residents did not embrace the role of 'bespoke' community journalist for some time. Skepticism about the aims of the project was one barrier to participation. The 'Ablaze' youth group based in St Theresa's church hall attended a series of digital storytelling workshops. Canvassing of opinion on the estate demonstrated the demand for a community newsletter followed by the launch of a website in January 2010. (<http://news.bespokeproject.org/bespoke>)

The Callon and Fishwick community produces stories for their 'hyper-local' paper and website. These are produced via three streams:

- i) community groups, agencies or larger organisations,
- ii) paid community reporters, and
- iii) volunteer reporters.

The community journalists interview designers about their intentions and canvas opinions. These are published in the hyper-local paper and online. This method offers a greater level of transparency than existing participatory design processes moving beyond end users to those in the wider community likely to interact with the design in some way (even if that's just passing it in the street!).

Initially local agencies saw the opportunity to connect with their stakeholders. Local organisations sent in a range of

content spanning 'about us' text, articles on past and future events and listings. We also found that when attempting to focus on potential story or interest areas, volunteers belonging to pre-existing groups focused on their own activities and were not keen to act as a more independent voice. This could not be categorized as critical and independent reporting on behalf of residents as a whole.

The use of agency group copy to act as a skeleton for a more substantial paper also presented another as yet unanswered question. Would residents who received this paper be alienated from getting involved because the publication was seen as a legitimate paper?

Design methods

Where is the User in all of this? Even the term 'User' is difficult. The problems underlying digital inclusion are not about Use and Usability. (For many of the deprived communities that are digitally excluded, the word User has far deeper connections with drug abuse than how accessible the Internet is). A Royal Society of Art's report "Connected Communities"[5] draws on Social Networking Analysis that uses a questionnaire within two deprived communities to provide data on social links between members of the community. The results identified "Super Connectors" that the authors interviewed to gain insights about community cohesion. According to Rowson these Super Connectors are to form the basis of future Co-Design "interventions" within the communities. In other words, the results of a survey that visualises community connections will form the basis of external designers being brought in to 'make interventions'. This approach is worrying not least because a survey will not pick up on people who do not complete them. Through Bespoke we hope to show that stronger, more sustainable, design solutions can arise from an integrated approach using Journalism as a tool for providing high-level insights for both initial ideas but also to provide a way to measure community impact.

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